

This was a month of deliberation, education and celebration for the Select Board.

Budget

Budget issues continue to dominate Select Board work as we juggle known and unknown elements of State aid cuts, potential new revenue options and Federal stimulus funds.

February began with the question of how to address the loss of \$978,000 of State money in the current fiscal year. We unanimously supported the Town Manager's recommendation for filling that gap: by applying money from a recent grant reimbursement of a past school roof project (\$550,000;) and savings from a one-month health care premium holiday (\$500,000.) The current surplus in the health care trust fund makes this possible, freeing up money the Town would have used for the monthly premium. (Employees would keep their share of the premium payment as well.) This option would not be used – and kept instead as a possible FY10 gap-closing tool – if either another large grant is approved, or if Federal stimulus money is received. Both would free up funds currently allocated to capital projects. Amherst is fortunate to have such options.

We finished the month with a special Wednesday meeting on the FY10 budget. The main focus was addressing a “worst-case-scenario,” in which no new revenues are achieved to off-set the nearly \$1million of reduced State aid (representing the municipal “share” of the \$2.77 million total cut to Amherst.) The current plan: leaving open a vacant position and deferring some technology spending; increasing LSSE program fees; eliminating unspecified positions; reducing public safety overtime; and increasing health care premiums. But the biggest question mark is whether nearly half the gap (\$400,000) would be covered through a negotiated employee wage freeze, or equivalent unspecified layoffs. At this meeting, we also discussed the recently-completed study of the full revenues and expenses attributable to each LSSE program.

At other meetings, we sought to educate ourselves and the community by spotlighting different budget elements that often raise questions: the nature and expense of Town lawsuits, vehicle inventory and employee overtime. We were briefed on the process of creating a recommendation for next year's capital spending. We also began to explore whether the Select Board should have a larger role in collective bargaining, and what that might look like.

We sent letters to legislators advocating support for the Governor's proposed municipal relief measures and health care reform.

Performance Goals for Town Manager

After weeks of discussion about how to create performance goals and what they should be, we finalized eight FY09 goals for the Town Manager. They address issues of fiscal and staff management; community relations; economic development; communication with the Select Board; creating mechanisms for collecting employee suggestions and public feedback; and establishing a system for volunteer recruitment and training. The goals provide a concrete tool for evaluation, and the process gives us a model to use and improve upon next year.

Sharing Information

To better inform the public about the work we do, the Select Board issued its first monthly activity report. We also sent a letter to the Chairs of all Town boards, commissions and committees, asking that

their meeting agendas and minutes be posted on the Town's web site, to share their work with the community and to encourage more participation.

Encouraging Downtown Vitality

We gave unanimous support to a recommendation and plan from the Parking Task Force to discourage meter-feeding and encourage more turn over and availability of prime parking. The plan calls for several weeks of informative warnings, followed by ticketing for parking in excess of a meter's posted time limit. Promoting use of the garage and the lot behind CVS for those needing to park longer-term – and promoting use of alternative transportation – is intended to provide easier access for customers and visitors.

Concern about pedestrian safety and access during this tough winter made the Select Board wonder whether the Town's sidewalk plowing policy ought to include the downtown area. We asked the Public Works Committee to consider the practicality, expense and logistics of this, and to bring us a recommendation before next winter.

Approvals and Licensing

Putting Amherst more in line with other communities, we approved an increase in ambulance rates, effective immediately. We also approved small increases to the water and sewer rates, to go into effect with the July 1st billing cycle. We approved a new Common Victualler's license for Papa Gino's, soon to open downtown. As we often do, we approved a new electricity pole, but rather unusually and for reasons unknown, this pole has been in place for a while already. We approved 12 special one-day liquor licenses, and we approved the appointments of four people to Town committees.

Town Manager Reports and Public Comment

The Town Manager's Report is being increasingly highlighted as a way to inform the Select Board and the public about the vital work of the Town. This month featured: the signing of the ambulance contract with Hadley; continuing communications with the Lt. Governor regarding Amherst's proposed stimulus projects; letters to unions seeking reconsideration of the FY10 wage increases; the retirement announcement by Fire Chief Keith Hoyle; a \$90,000 gift from Amherst College; granting of a permit to the Fourth of July Parade Committee; re-opening of the Middle School pool, and more.

Members of the public addressed the Select Board with concerns including responsibility for policies, accessibility and transparency of information, and tree issues. Information was also shared with us regarding a new community banking concept.

250th Celebration

The highlight of the month: the Founders Day celebration. We participated in a ceremony on the steps of Town Hall with dignitaries from local and State government, and from UMass, Amherst and Hampshire Colleges. A reception followed in the Town Room, featuring descendants of Amherst's founding families and a slideshow of historic local images. Occasions like this remind us why we dedicate ourselves to this community.